

## Patterns of Identity Loss in Trans-Cultural Contact Situations Between Bantu and Khoesan Groups in Western Botswana

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### Abstract

According to Lamy (1979) and Pool (1979), ethnic identity comprises four distinctive features, namely linguistic identity, cultural identity, autonymic identity and ethnonymic identity. When an ethnic group is losing its identity because of pressure or attraction from a major or dominant ethnic group in a marked bilingualism situation (Batibo, 1992, 2005), the loss is usually progressive, starting from linguistic identity and ending with ethnonymic identity. Although this pattern has been attested in a number of cases, particularly in trans-cultural situations, there have been several exceptions.

This paper is based on a study which investigated the patterns of ethnic identity loss in western Botswana, Southern Africa, which is both linguistically and culturally complex, due to the co-existence of Bantu and Khoesan groups. The study showed that the ethnic identity loss model can be distorted, where there are factors that have strong impact on people's lives in terms of fundamental human needs. Also, strong external socio-political pressure, such as restrictions and group domination may contribute to this situation.

**Key words:** Ethnic identity; Minority language; Language shift; Autonymic identity; Ethnonymic identity; Trans-cultural relations

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### INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity is a common feature of African societies<sup>1</sup>. According to Bhugra (2004), ethnic identity is a feeling of togetherness prompted by shared common ancestry, history, heritage, traditions and culture. Ethnic identity usually depends on distinctive cultural or physical criteria, which make the group unique and different from other groups. An ethnic group may set itself apart using superiority or inferiority attributes, based on real or alleged physical or social traits (Thompson, 1989).

According to Lamy (1979) and Pool (1979), ethnic identity comprises four distinctive features, namely linguistic identity, cultural (including socio-economic) identity, autonymic identity and ethnonymic identity. When an ethnic group is losing its identity because of pressure or attraction from a major or dominant ethnic group in a marked bilingualism situation (Batibo, 1992, 2005), the loss is usually progressive, involving, first, loss of linguistic identity, then cultural identity, followed by autonymic identity. Then finally the loss of ethnonymic identity will complete the absorption of the affected community into the dominant one. Thus many of the minority language speakers in Africa have shifted, not only linguistically and culturally, but also in their personal and ethnic names following that progression (Batibo 1992; Chebanne and Nthapelelang 2000; Molosiwa 2000; Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2000). This progressive loss of identity pattern, could be termed ethnic identity loss model (Lamy, 1979; Pool, 1979).

The validity of this model has been attested in a number of case studies and has been found to be, largely

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consistent. These case studies include Welsh and Canadian French (Pool, 1979), Otjiherero-Mbanderu (Molosiwa, 2000), Naro (Visser, 2000), Shiyeyi (Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2000), Zaramo (Batibo, 1992), Khwedam (Batibo, 2010) and South African Hindi (Mestrie, 2002). In all these studies, the languages involved came from different origins, namely Indo-European, Bantu and Khoesan.

## 1. INVESTIGATING THE LOSS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN WESTERN BOTSWANA

This paper attempts to examine the patterns of ethnic identity loss in western Botswana. Botswana is a small landlocked country in southern Africa, with a population of 1.9 million people (Botswana Central Statistical

Bureau, 2001). It has 28 languages belonging to Bantu, Khoesan and Indo-European families (Andersen & Janson, 1997). This study is based on an extensive sociolinguistic research project, which was carried out in western Botswana, from June to August 2014, to determine the patterns of language use, culture and identity. The aim of this article, as a product of that research, is mainly to find out if the patterns of language shift in this linguistically complex zone were following the ethnic identity loss model. In this zone, a hierarchy of languages is found, with varying social, economic and demographic status (Smieja, 1996). The speakers of many of these languages were gradually shifting to the more dominant languages at the higher level, thus progressively losing their ethnic identity. The languages found in this zone are listed in Table 1 below, as adapted from Botswana Central Statistical Bureau (2001).

**Table 1**  
**The Status Hierarchy of the Languages of Western Botswana (After Batibo et al., 2003)<sup>2</sup>**

Hierarchy level	Language	Estimated no. of mother-tongue speakers	Percentages of mother - tongue speakers	Status	Main villages where spoken
1.	Setswana	1, 335,000	78.6%	National lang. and lingua franca	Most of Botswana
2.	Shekgalagari (represented by Shengologa and Sheshaga)	48, 000	2.82%	Lingual franca in western Botswana	Hukuntsi Lehututu Tshane
3	!Xóǀ <sup>1</sup>	5, 000	0.29%	Localized	Zutshwa
3	Nama	1, 000	0.006%	Localized	Lokgwabe
3	/Hasi	300	0.002%	Localized	Kang

The main languages found in this zone were: Setswana, a Bantu language and Botswana's national language and main lingua franca; Shekgalagari, a Bantu language and main lingua franca in most of western Botswana, with several varieties, including Shengologa and Sheshaga; !Xóǀ, a Southern Khoesan language, spoken mainly in Zutshwa; Nama, a Central Khoesan language, spoken mainly in Lokgwabe; and /Hasi, a Southern Khoesan language, related to !Xóǀ, spoken mainly in Kang. The languages in Table 1 above were categorized in three levels on the basis of their social, economic and demographic status. Those at the lowest levels (mainly Khoesan, were under pressure from the languages above (mainly Bantu) to shift to the higher level linguistically and culturally. This process was taking place progressively.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

The data for this study were collected in western Botswana by using several methods, particularly a structured sociolinguistic questionnaire, which investigated the use of the local languages in the various domains, their transmission to the next generations, the attitudes of the speakers towards them, their vitality and the cultural practices associated with these languages. In addition, the study explored the patterns of identity loss and if such patterns followed the ethnic identity loss model. Other methods were also used in this study. These included interviews, proficiency tests and observations. About 50 informants were involved for each of the ethnic groups. The responses are summarized in Table 2 below.

<sup>2</sup> English and Africans, although spoken also in this zone, as official and settler languages, respectively, were left out in this study, since they are not indigenous languages.

**Table 2**  
**The Patterns of Language Use, Cultural Practices and Identity Among the Speakers of the Languages of Western Botswana**

	Theme	Ngol.	Shaga	!Xoo	/Hasi	Nama	Tswana
1.	Percentage of mother-tongue use in family	93	89	77	73	83	98
2.	Percentage of mother-tongue use in settlement	86	66	56	52	59	100
3.	Percentage of mother-tongue use in public affairs	44	39	19	20	18	87
4.	Percentage of those who would like their children to learn or speak mother tongue	73	26	68	67	84	94
5.	Percentage of ethnic based cultural practices	57	38	27	29	64	100
6.	Percentage of ethnic based socio-economic activities	81	76	12	10	18	93
7.	Percentage of ethnic based autonyms of informants	28	16	33	59	20	91
8.	Percentage of preference for own ethnonymic identity	84	74	83	79	100	100

Note. Ngol. = Shengologa (a variety of Shekgalagari), Shaga = Sheshaga (a variety of Shekgalagari), Tswana = Setswana.

### 3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the data in Table 2 above, the following observations could be made:

Firstly, all the minority languages in this zone, namely, Shekgalagari (represented by Shengologa and Sheshaga), !Xóǀ, /Hasi and Nama were generally very actively used by their speakers, especially in the daily activities of the family and the settlement. However one noticed the following:

- (a) The minority languages were not formally used in the public affairs, such as administration, education, judiciary or media. This is, presumably, because of the prevailing national language policy that the only publicly used languages should be English, as the official language, and Setswana, as the national language (Government of Botswana 1994). One of the outcomes of this policy was to confine the use of minority languages to family and settlement use, thus marginalizing them. As a result their speakers accord their low esteem and prestige.
- (b) There is a progressive shift of the minority language speakers towards the higher level languages. The speakers of the Shekgalagari varieties, namely Shengologa and Sheshaga, (Level 2) are gradually shifting towards Setswana (Level 1); and the most marginalized languages (Level 3), namely !Xóǀ, /Hasi and Nama, towards Shekgalagari, which is the lingua franca of the area (Level 2).

Secondly, according to the findings of the study, most minority groups wanted their languages to be transmitted to the younger generation. The only exception was the Sheshaga speakers, who were fast shifting to Setswana due to the overwhelming pressure from Setswana dominance in the Kang area.

Thirdly, as it is the case with most other minority groups in Botswana, all the five ethnic groups are still practicing some of their traditional customs and beliefs. However, in many instances, they have adopted the

mainstream Setswana cultural ways of life. Some of them, especially Shengologa and Nama are striving to revive many of the lost cultural practices, such as rituals and folklore. In the case of Shengologa, the group is struggling to disentangle itself from the painful historical experience of *bolatla* (serfdom) system, in which both Shengologa and Sheshaga groups were made serfs of Setswana speaking rulers for over two hundred years. During this period, many of the traditions and cultural practices were eroded (Gadibolae, 1993; Mautle, 1986; Monaka, 2014). On the other hand, the Nama speakers have kept much of their cultural practices vibrant, mainly due to the constant interaction with the Nama speakers in Namibia, a neighbouring country, where the language is actively spoken by more than 200,000 people (Auberger, 1990; Batibo & Tsonope, 2000).

Fourthly, both Shengologa and Sheshaga have maintained their traditional socio-economic way of life. This is because Shekgalagari, just like Setswana, are Bantu ethnic groups, whose main socio-economic activities are based on arable farming and animal husbandry. Hence, Setswana domination of Shekgalagari did not affect their socio-economic way of life to any conspicuous extent. However, !Xóǀ, /Hasi and Nama are Khoesan groups, which depend on hunting and trapping animals as well as gathering wild fruits and plants for livelihood. They traditionally depend entirely on land, as mother-nature. But, the Botswana government instituted a moratorium in 1997 and 2002, forbidding these indigenous groups from hunting, as the area was declared a national game reserve, under the name Central Kalahari Game Reserve (Saugestad 2004). Following this decree, all the inhabitants in the area were resettled in other areas, where houses, schools and other social services were made available. Another reason for the relocation, as explained by the Government, was to allow it to rationalize the use of land in the area. Although this move was meant to provide the affected communities with a modern way of life, it derailed them from their independent socio-economic way of life and made them dependant on government. This resulted in serious frustration, despair

and idleness. Many of them turned to alcohol abuse and abandoned much of their traditions, cultural practices and rituals (Nhlekisana, 2007)..

Fifthly, most minority groups have abandoned their personal names or giving children ethnic based names. This is mainly because of the historical stigma forced which has forced many ethnic groups to adopt Setswana or English names. Moreover, the emergence of many Setswana-based independent African Christian churches in the area, which brought strong spirituality, gave more focus on Setswana, as a language of the congregations. On the other hand, !Xóǀ, /Hasi and Nama speakers seemed to prefer Setswana and English names as a way of camouflaging themselves ethnically, especially in public places, like schools, churches, clinics and government offices. Many of them had two names, an ethnic name used in the family and a Setswana or English name, which is used in public. The latter made it easy for other ethnic groups to pronounce or write the more familiar form.

Sixthly, all the minority languages have maintained strong ethnonymic identity. The fact that people assert their ethnic identity even where they have lost much of their languages, culture or personal names has been observed in other studies, which include Batibo (1992), Molosiwa (2000), Chebanne and Nthapelelang (2000), Molosiwa (2000) and Smieja (1996, 2003). This is true even with marginalized minority groups. From the above, it is

possible to present the pattern of ethnic identity loss of the five ethnic groups (if one counts Shengologa and Sheshaga as separate entities) in western Botswana as in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**The Pattern of Ethnic Identity Loss of the Minority Groups in Western Botswana**

	Type of identity	Level of loss
1.	Linguistic identity	Relatively strong
2.	Cultural identity	Highly eroded
3.	Autonymic identity	Almost lost
4.	Ethnonymic identity	Considerably strong

#### 4. EXPLAINING THE DISTORTION OF THE ETHNIC IDENTITY LOSS PATTERN

As seen in Table 3 above, the ethnic identity loss model was not followed, according to the outcome of the study. A closer look at the five communities involved reveals that all these ethnic groups, namely Shengologa, Sheshaga, !Xóǀ, /Hasi and Nama, are in a crisis in that they have been denied some crucial basic needs, which would readily force them to change their lifestyles. According to Maslow's (1943, 1954) Theory of Human Motivation, the hierarchy of human needs can be presented as in Table 4 below:

**Table 4**  
**Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (Maslow 1943, 1954)**

1.	Physiological needs (basic)	They include air, food, water, sleep, shelter, excretion, etc.
2.	Safety	They include security of body, livelihood, morality, health, etc.
3.	Love/belonging	They include friendship, family, sexual intimacy, etc.
4.	Esteem	They include self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect, etc.
5.	Self-actualization	They include creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts, etc.

According to this hierarchy of human needs, a community is ready to alter its cultural way of life, including its socio-economic activities and self identity, if denied access to any of the fundamental needs. The speakers of !Xóǀ, /Hasi and Nama depend traditionally solely on land, which is the source of their livelihood and habitat. Their livelihood is based on hunting and trapping wild animals as well as gathering fruits and roots. The Botswana government's removal or re-settling of the Khoesan groups from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve has therefore critically disabled them, as they see themselves as losing a basic necessity in their physiological life, which in turn triggers a sense of insecurity and despair. Their cultural identity has therefore been substantially disrupted, although the linguistic one is still intact. This situation has been experienced in other continents, where indigenous groups have been removed or re-settled from their traditional lands, such as the case of the aboriginals in Australia, whose frustration has also led them to abuse

alcohol (Nkelekeng, p.c).

As for the Kgalagari groups (Shengologa and Sheshaga), their historical experience of *bolatla* (serfdom) in the hands of the dominant Setswana group has grossly affected their self-confidence and self-esteem, making them vulnerable to a sense of insecurity, both physically and psychologically. This has led them to turn to spiritual recourse in indulging in deep Christian practices. Since Setswana is regarded as the language of the Bible, given that until recently, the only local language in which the Bible was translated was Setswana and also most church activities were in Setswana. The extensive use of Setswana in church activities resulted in the adoption of Setswana religious names. Also, the inferiority complex caused by the historical legacy of serfdom made many members of this group to adopt Setswana cultural identity as a way of integration into the mainstream Setswana way of life. But, they have kept actively their linguistic identity as a way of self-preservation and revival (Lukusa, 2000; Janson, 1995).

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that although the ethnic identity loss model is generally valid, it can be distorted, especially where there are factors that have strong impact on people's lives in terms of fundamental human needs. As seen in the study, the most vulnerable features of the model are the cultural and autonymic identities. Strong external socio-cultural pressure, such as restrictions, assimilation or deep spiritual involvement, may distort both cultural and autonymic identities. This explains why many communities all over the world have adopted foreign names or cultural practices, but maintained their linguistic and ethnic identities.

The Maslow's (1943) theory of Human Needs explains very convincingly why many marginalized minority communities choose to shift their ethnic identities in favour of the mainstream communities. This is true where there is gross incompatibility between the cultures or socio-economic practices of the communities involved, as also remarked in Hofstede's cultural relativity of the quality of life concept (Hofstede, 1984).

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